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TAGS: IS LE PGOV PREL SY

SUBJECT: MGLE01: SPEAKER NABIH BERRI CALMS DOWN, BUT
MAINTAINS CRITICAL STANCE

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador. Reason: Sections 1.4 (b) a
nd (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Coming only a day after his public outburst against PM Fuad Siniora and the Core Group meetings, the Nabih Berri who met the Ambassador and Poloff on 9/22 was notably calm and full of sweet reason. He insisted his only concern in voicing his displeasure was the well-being of Lebanon. He gave a well-prepared (albeit intermittently silly) brief on why privatization, particularly of the state enterprises mentioned in New York, would be a serious error. The speaker went on to criticize at length the prime minister's "lack of consultation" in the preparation of his Core Group presentations. Showing a sense of unease, the speaker pressed the Ambassador on the content of the latter's meetings in Paris last week, as well as the real American position regarding a possible presidential succession. Nevertheless, he predicted that Lahoud will remain in office until the last day of his term, "unless Mehlis has something." At the end of the meeting, The Ambassador gave the speaker a letter written by President Lahoud to UNSYG Annan in June 2000. Berri was stunned to the point of reading out loud, repeatedly, the letter which stated an acceptance "without prejudice" of the provisional LE/IS boundary, a position which would sidestep the Shebaa Farms imbroglio. After muttering "this is very bad," Berri said that Lahoud would either deny he ever wrote it, or had simply unknowingly signed it because it was simply another document which had been placed before him. End summary.

¶2. (C) Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri met with the Ambassador and PolOff on September 22 at Ain al-Tine, his official residence in West Beirut. This meeting occurred one day after the speaker had strongly and dramatically criticized both the prime minister and the "real agenda" of the Core Group meetings held in New York earlier this week. In his meeting with the Ambassador, however, he was calm, reasonable, and well-rehearsed. He spun his heavy criticism of the previous day as a civic responsibility to his country, that is, he wished only to point out to the Lebanese people that the positions offered in New York were not the result of consultations and had therefore surprised and dismayed various political figures. He assured the Ambassador that he was reasonable and would await the prime minister's return before issuing further criticism, even "though the prime minister was not following the law"

¶3. (C) He then launched into a lengthy defense of maintaining state ownership of certain enterprises which had been mentioned as possible privatization targets. He asked rhetorically why should the government sell its most valuable assets, namely Middle East Airlines, Casino du Liban, and Intra, when other less attractive properties were losing money every year. He appeared unconcerned that capital markets would place a higher value on the former rather than the latter, even though he admitted that "no one would invest" in the country's mismanaged electricity sector. Rather, he was focused on the revenue stream that would disappear once those companies were privatized. His arguments and reasoning -- which, while "old school," were

well-prepared -- implied that he would fight privatization strongly should it come up for debate.

PARIS II..."WHERE WE BROKE ALL OUR PROMISES"

¶4. (C) Presenting himself as the epitome of civic responsibility, he declared that in light of the broken promises of the Paris II accord, which hurt Lebanon's credibility and credit ratings, he simply wanted an economic reform plan that was feasible -- suggesting that PM Siniora's proposals were not. He plaintively complained that, "I do not know what the prime minister wants to do." But he promised he would try to work with him and the Cabinet. Wrapping himself once again in the flag, Speaker Berri claimed that "during the war, I paid a big price in not dividing Lebanon and I will not do it now."

¶5. (C) Addressing the fact that two Lebanese delegations represented the country in New York, the speaker insisted there should have been only one. "President Lahoud is the responsible official to represent Lebanon, and as long as he is president, he should be president." Pointing out that when President Lahoud met with UNSYG Annan and UN Special Envoy Terje Roed-Larsen, the foreign minister could not be included because he was with Siniora. Speaker Berri believes that and other instances "said to the world, we are not a unified state."

¶6. (C) However, he did admit that there were positives, specifically that the Core Group showed significant international support for Lebanon and gave the government an opportunity to speak. "Do not misunderstand my position" he asked, "we appreciate the meetings, but I do not accept promises made there that we cannot keep. I don't want to repeat Paris II."

"WHAT DID YOU DO IN PARIS ?"

¶7. (C) Changing topics, the speaker addressed the political situation and directly asked the Ambassador who he spoke with last week in Paris. The Ambassador informed the Speaker Berri that he met with Saad Hariri and others and, as he has with other political figures, asked them to refrain from trying to determine political consequences ahead of the completion of the Mehlis investigation. But if such consequences did lead to a presidential selection, the Ambassador urged his Paris interlocutors to emphasize the leadership qualities sought by the Lebanese people, rather than the usual political maneuverings. Speaker Berri agreed that any new president had to come from the Christian community, but also appeal to the rest of the country. Additionally, any new leader would have to represent the sentiments of liberty and transparency demonstrated in the March 14 mass demonstrations. Even though he voiced approval of these ideas, Berri could not resist asking the Ambassador about the "rumor that the U.S. was really pushing Michel Aoun." The Ambassador responded with a flat "that is simply not true." The Ambassador explained to Berri that the USG did not, and would not, have a particular candidate, which Berri seemed, upon reflection, to accept (for now).

"HE WILL STAY UNTIL THE LAST DAY"

¶8. (C) Despite his engagement in this discussion of leadership qualities, Speaker Berri finished with the comment, "I think he (Lahoud) will stay until the last day of his term," then -- following a long pause -- "unless Mehlis has something. On that day I told Walid (Jumblatt) we have to talk, but we will wait until then." He then repeated to the Ambassador a rumor he recently had received that "Mehlis really has nothing."

¶9. (C) As the conversation wound up, the ambassador presented the speaker with a June 2000 letter written by Emile Lahoud to UNSYG Kofi Annan in which the Lebanese

president offered to accept for now -- without prejudice to future negotiations -- the UN demarcation in the Shebaa Farms region. The Ambassador asked Speaker Berri if this could somehow be used to creatively deal with that difficult issue.

The speaker took out his reading glasses and intently studied the letter, then reading the Arabic version out loud, repeatedly (and in increasing volumes), as if not able to believe its text. Again, the Ambassador inquired as to whether this could change anything. Speaker Berri chuckled in a bemused way and softly said, "This is very bad."

Recovering his poise, Berri replied that he could arrange for the Ambassador a presentation of various documents dating back to the Ottoman regime which he believes clearly proves Lebanese ownership of the disputed area, to which the Ambassador asked why the Lebanese had not made the claim on Shebaa when the area was first occupied in 1967. Speaker Berri declined to answer and said at any rate, Lahoud would say he never authored the letter, that it was simply one of the many documents placed in front of him that he had unknowingly signed.

COMMENT

¶10. (C) Speaker Nabih Berri displayed his usual agility and quickness in coming up with plausible explanations for implausible actions/events. Although he played with the name Jean Obeid as a potential occupant of Baabda Palace, it is clear that he has not yet decided to withdraw his own support from Lahoud, given that his political fortunes are tied to the president's. Berri may not be entirely comfortable with the prospect of Lebanese political figures removed from office before the end of their terms. End comment.

FELTMAN